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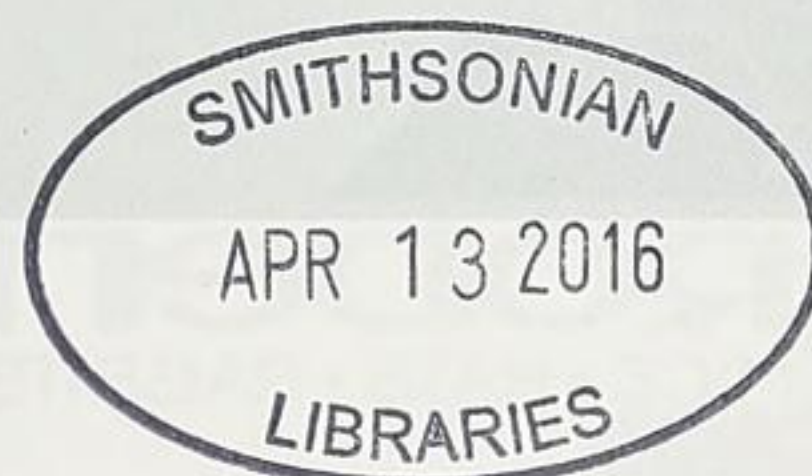
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Lewa Wildlife Conservancy

By Bill Konstant

Since the inception of AAZK's Bowling for Rhinos initiative more than 25 years ago, its annual fundraising events have supported Kenya's Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, which was added to UNESCO's Mount Kenya World Heritage Site in 2013 and is proud to be on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature's Green List of successful protected areas. Established initially as Ngare Seroi in 1983 by Anna Merz, David Craig and his son Ian to protect Africa's critically endangered black rhinos, the sanctuary was renamed Lewa in 1995. The Conservancy is the founding member of the Northern Rangelands Trust, a community-based partnership that focuses on wildlife conservation and the livelihoods of nomadic pastoralists in northern Kenya. As a result of the Trusts' programs, the area under integrated conservation management in this region has grown from 5,000 km² to 25,000 km² - roughly three times the size of Yellowstone National Park - with an ultimate goal for expansion of 35,000 km² - larger than the state of Indiana. Lewa is also a founding member of the Ol Pejeta Conservancy, which ranks as East Africa's largest black rhino sanctuary and is home to the last three northern white rhinos on the planet.

Starting with 15 animals back in the 1980s, Lewa's black rhinos now number more than 70 and represent more than 10% of the species' population in Kenya. However, international poaching gangs remain a serious threat to Lewa's rhinos, so recent efforts have been made to translocate some individuals to adjoining areas where rhinos formerly occurred and can now be more effectively protected. Three years ago, 11 black rhinos were reintroduced to the neighboring Borana Conservancy. The connected Lewa-Borana landscape provides close to 100,000 acres of prime habitat for black rhinos and other threatened wildlife such as white rhinos (which was introduced to Kenya to help save the species), elephants, hippos, lions, Grevy's zebras, African wild dogs, cheetah, martial eagles, secretary birds, crowned cranes and at least five species of vultures.

Field monitors are Lewa's eyes and ears on the ground. They begin work at dawn armed with binoculars and radios, and alert armed rangers

Lewa Wildlife Conservancy is supported by Bowling for Rhinos.
Photo by Jim Haigwood



- Kenya police reservists - regarding any emergencies or unusual sightings. It's important to note that Lewa's anti-poaching units not only ensure the safety of resident rhinos, but also improve security for local communities, in which they frequently arrest poachers for stealing livestock - cattle, camels, sheep and goats.

According to Edward Ndiritu, Lewa's Head of Anti-Poaching, "We have been able to protect all our rhinos from poachers since December 2013, but that does not mean we can now relax, not even a little. The threat to rhino and elephant in Kenya has not waned, and as long as this remains the case, we cannot afford to be anything than efficient, vigilant and innovative." Approximately 150 men and women are employed to protect Lewa's 130 rhinos, their success based in many ways on a strong working relationship with local communities, according to John Pameri, Head of General Security. Staff morale is also key to the success of anti-poaching efforts, with newly-upgraded housing facilities for rangers paying big dividends in terms of performance. As field ranger Francis Kobia is proud to say, "The provision of the new amenities has greatly improved the morale of the team. Everybody is happy with the great standards of living we enjoy, and it makes us motivated to continue working for Lewa and protecting wildlife."

In 2015, Lewa, the Northern Rangelands Trust and the Kenya Wildlife Service embarked on a program to relocate black rhinos to a sanctuary owned and operated by the Sera Community Conservancy in Samburu County. Poachers killed the last rhino in this region decades ago. Ten of the 20 animals selected for reintroduction from Lewa, Nakuru National Park and Nairobi National Park have been moved thus far, and all of the translocated rhinos will be fitted with satellite-based transmitters for monitoring purposes. Rangers from local communities have been trained in data gathering, anti-poaching operations, bush craft and effective patrolling, and can count on Lewa, Northern Rangelands Trust and Kenya Wildlife Service anti-poaching units for back-up. At least two US zoos - San Diego and St. Louis - are directly supporting this initiative. 🐘

So much more than rhinos - Bowling for Rhinos supports many endangered species. Photo by Patty Pearthree.

